

MACAULAY'S THIRD CHAPTER

119

tors is a matter utterly indifferent to scientific history, whose object is to explain and analyze the past, on which the present can throw no more light than the old age of an individual can throw light on his youth. Macaulay's constant preoccupation is not to explain his period by previous periods, but to show how vastly the period of which he treats has been outstripped by the period in which he lives. Whatever may be the topic—the wealth or population of the country, the size and structure of the towns, the roads, the coaches, the lighting of London, it matters not—the comparison always made is with subsequent England, not previous England.¹

A reader who seeks to understand the past is not satisfied with learning that England was a very different place a couple of centuries ago. He wishes to perceive and to comprehend the process by which seventeenth-century England developed into nineteenth-century England.

That part of the process which fell within the limits of the period covered by Macaulay should be related and explained in his pages. Take a few of the subjects which ought to be included in any account of the development of England between 1685 and 1702, examine how far they are adequately treated, and see where Macaulay's account needs to be corrected or supplemented.

The Revolution of 1688 and the great war which followed it affected every branch of the national

life, sometimes by retarding or accelerating tendencies already in existence, and at other times by setting new forces at work. Begin by considering briefly the position of the labouring classes. In his account of the town and country labourer given in chapter iii, Macaulay omitted one very important fact. He forgot to mention the 'Settlement Act', passed in 1662, which prevented the labourer from migrating from

¹ J. Cotter Morison, Macaulay (1882), pp. 170-1.